

Church, courts and child protection office work to recruit and train foster parents

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A Gulfport church, courts and the Division of Family and Children's Services are working together to train prospective foster parents in an effort to provide safe temporary homes for hundreds of abused and neglected children in Harrison County.

Eighty-eight people who have signed up to be foster parents in Harrison County will spend three days of intensive training April 15, 16 and 17 in a program put together by Michael Memorial Baptist Church, the Division of Family and Children's services, Harrison County Court Judge Margaret Alfonso and Supreme Court Justice Dawn Beam.

The weekend training is part of Michael Memorial Baptist Church's Rescue 100 Project, an effort to train and license foster parents to meet the needs of abused and neglected children in Harrison County.

"What we are trying to do is partner with the faith-based community," said Justice Beam, who is coordinating efforts to put on the weekend training for foster parents. "The whole community is stepping up to take care of our kids."

"At this point in time, it's important that the court lead the way in encouraging the Department of Human Services, courts and the community at large to come together to effect positive change in child protective services," Judge Beam said.

About 50 new foster homes may be licensed as a result of the upcoming training. Division of Family and Children's Services Executive Director David Chandler said that licensing 50 more foster homes will make a huge difference. "That will go a long way toward curing the problem there on the Coast."

The Rescue 100 Project started last year after Michael Memorial Pastor Rev. Tony Karnes asked to meet with Judge Alfonso to find out what the local needs were. Karnes said he came away astonished at the scope of the problem and committed to help fix it.

"She began telling me story after story about the situation and the desperate need for (foster) homes. I have absolutely no ideas that conditions were so dire," Karnes said. "How can we not know this is going on right under our noses? I was completely astonished....I knew from that point on that I had to do everything in my power to get involved."

As of April 1, there were 727 Harrison County children in Department of Human Services custody. Between January 1, 2015, and February 8, 2016, referrals to Harrison County Youth Court for abuse and neglect totaled 5,044, Judge Alfonso said.

Abuse and neglect cases have increased since she took the bench as Youth Court judge in 2011, Judge Alfonso said. Part of it is due to better awareness and reporting and having more DHS workers in Harrison County. Drugs and domestic violence also are driving up the numbers. "We are having so much of an increase of cases because of parents' drug use. We have more reports of domestic violence with children present."

While the goal of the Youth Court and child protective services is to reunite families, children in abusive homes need temporary placement in foster care.

"We just do not have enough foster homes," Judge Alfonso said.

At a meeting last year with Gulf Coast Department of Human Services staff, Karnes asked how many foster homes were needed. Adding 20 foster homes would be very helpful, he was told. He pressed for numbers needed to fix the problem. About 100, he was told. So he set out to recruit 100 foster families.

About 200 people showed up at an orientation for prospective foster parents late last year. About 50 families signed up for training, said Gulfport attorney Michael Dickinson, a member of Michael Memorial Baptist Church.

Chandler said he was excited when he learned that 50 families had volunteered. "All they needed were the certification credentials to help children. I got so excited. I thought it was something that we could do in a couple of weeks. I was the new man on the block. I didn't know how involved it was," Chandler said.

Things moved slowly. Foster parent training was going to take months. The required classes were spread out over a period of five to six weeks. Those who missed a session had to wait five or six more weeks for the next time training on that topic was offered, Dickinson said. Church members involved in Rescue 100 wanted a way to expedite.

About a month ago, Dickinson turned to family connections. His father is Supreme Court Justice Jess Dickinson. They and others met with Chandler, who previously served on the Supreme Court. Recently appointed Supreme Court Justice Dawn Beam asked to help. Chandler asked Justice Beam to take charge of moving the effort forward.

"I just don't take 'no' for an answer very well," Justice Beam said.

Judge Alfonso said the back-to-back classes over the course of three days is unprecedented.

Chandler said, "We are not creating a shortcut to the requirements of becoming a foster family. We are looking for and finding ways to better serve the prospective foster parents, and the children in our care."

The April 15-17 event is expected to enable about 50 families to complete the required training to serve as foster parents, Michael Dickinson said. After that, those families must still meet the approval of the Department of Human Services in a home study. It may still take months for them to become licensed.

Chandler said that earlier estimates from a private vendor put the cost of the training at about \$250,000. "These folks are getting it done for peanuts compared for what it was going to cost."

Volunteers including nurses, Youth Court staff, Harrison County CASA workers and others have stepped in to help with the training, Judge Alfonso said. Volunteers are doing the required fingerprinting of prospective foster parents. Justice Beam is cooking to feed participants.

Karnes said, "We realized that they have an incredible struggle that they face every day. They face extraordinary challenges. We just want to come alongside and help in the only way we can."

Chandler said that he is interested in replicating what Rescue 100 is doing. "There is no way to do it without community involvement and without the churches' involvement."

"If they pull this off, that will go a long way on helping us keep our state agency out of the grasp of the federal courts," Chandler said. "It is going to make it possible for us to comply with all of those requirements placed on us."

Statewide, about 5,000 children are in DHS custody. The state needs about 3,000 certified foster families willing to take in children, Chandler said. They have only about 1,500.

Dickinson said, "This weekend is kind of a pilot deal. Once we get the bugs worked out, the goal is to not just do it in Harrison County, but to do it all over the state." Other churches have expressed interest.

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